THE POST-INDUSTRIAL WORLD

The mould of the Industrial Revolution was crafted in the late 18th century; the metal was cast in the early 1800s. The revolution uprooted much of the agriculture industry, and in came multitudes of cheap labor to the cities. Thinkers, economists, politicians, and writers saw the results—the poverty of the working class, the wealth disparity, the filth of the city, and the production like never before—and some despaired, whilst others encouraged. Among the variety of philosophical, political, and literary reactions, not one person proclaimed that utopia had come. No, to all, the Industrial Revolution was a stepping-stone to something better.

Tremendous production allowed the common people to own goods that were once dreams. As a result, thinking turned more materialistic, and capitalism, fueled by competition, took root in society’s heart. The economic principle of self-interest had brought them thus far, and to it they adhered.

But such competition to rise above financially reduced men to animals, many thinkers thought. Marx described this world where all laboring workers are “instruments of labor, more of less expensive to use, according to their age and sex.” They are but hands and feet. Darwin saw the same scene and said it was as it should be. With the help of Spencer, his theory of evolution applied to society; social Darwinism accepted the competition. It was only “nature red in tooth and claw”; men were animals surviving to work harder, earn more, and be fitter. So materialism was justified as natural. Liberalists and early capitalists such as John Smith and Ricardo did not go so far to call competition natural. They did, however, support the notion of self-interest, which if each individual followed, would encourage the economic growth of a society. All these thinkers acknowledged the increasing mentality of material gain.

Yet they were not satisfied. Interestingly, Spencer, a social Darwinist, believed that the government should play less a role in helping the poor, because the poor were weak and to be disposed. Pure liberals overlooked the poverty of the poor in favor of relying on the invisible hand. But the new liberals were in direct contrast to the social Darwinists and even the old liberals; they stressed equality and enough government involvement to avoid exploitation of the poor. Nietzsche encouraged the evolution of man on a spiritual level. Soon, he hoped, men would have no need for God. They would be gods, or “the overman.” His wishes concurred with Spencer’s. “God is dead,” he writes in *Zarathustra’s Prologue*. “How weary I am of my good and my evil! All that is poverty and filth and wretched contentment,” says Zarathustra, Nietzsche’s model of the overman. To him, spiritual morals were keeping men from improving themselves, because the morals stressed helping the weak, whom Nietzsche thought were burdens to evolution.

Marx took his reaction to the political level. He opens *The Communist Manifesto* with “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” Thus he introduces the two existing classes of his day, the proletarians and the bourgeois. The proletarians, or the working class, are like slaves to the bourgeois, or the middle, merchant class. Proletarians, greater in number yet viewed only as appendages, are constantly struggling to rise up to the bourgeois. Marx called for the proletarian movement, a “self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.” Though capitalism was a stepping stone, as were slavery and serfdom, the natural process was for it to give ground to communism, which consists of only one, equal class. He prophesies, “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”

John Stuart Mill, like other new liberals, saw the importance of equality in capitalism. Individuals needed to be able to improve their own situation for an incentive for work to be provided. But if inequality was prominent, then the system would not allow all individuals the same chance, the same incentive. Thus, John Stuart Mill advocated abolitionism and women’s rights. He writes, “It is, that human beings are no longer born to their place in life, and chained down by an inexorable bond to the place they are born to, but are free to employ their faculties and such favorable chance as to offer, to achieve the lot which may appear to them most desirable.” In other words, one’s birth does not dictate one’s life. One’s work does.

Realism was a reaction in the literary world to the starkness of life that became apparent with the toil of urban life. Romantic ideas did not eixst for the people anymore. Instead, there was a call to replicate “the exact, complete, and sincere reproduction of the social milieu in which we live,” in Philippe Duranty’s words. “Multitude, solitude: identical terms, and interchangeable by the active and fertile poet,” are the words of Charles Baudelaire. Likewise, Dostoevsky paints 19th century Russia: drunken, dirty, and excitable. Raskolnikov, whilst living in the bustling city, is completely alienated. Human beings are losing the connection with other human beings in the pursuit of self-interest, of materialism.

No reaction to the post-industrial world was satisfactory. The social Darwinists desired the evolution of man. The new liberals struggled for equality. Marx envisioned a completely new political, economic system. Writers depicted the real without the sugar, because there was no sugar. All cried, the best is still to come.